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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [OSCE](#) [BY](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: MOSCOW CALLS LUKASHENKO'S REELECTION "LEGITIMATE"

Classified By: A/POL Bruce Donahue. For reasons: 1.4(B/D).

¶1. (SBU) The MFA called Belarus' presidential election "legitimate" in a March 20 press release. (Informal translation of text in para 4). According to the press release, the election took place according to recognized norms of transparency and reflected the will of the Belarusian people. In Moscow's view, the electoral result should be respected and Belarus should be left to develop democratic institutions at its own pace. Aside from the MFA's statement, there have been no other official comments on the election.

¶2. (C) The Russian press generally stuck to a straightforward description of the election results. Izvestiya reflected the general tenor of press coverage by noting that there had been "no doubt" Lukashenko would win, especially since he had made sure there were no real challengers. Business-oriented Vedomosti ironically labeled Lukashenko a "loyal and dependable partner" -- as someone who can make Putin appear more democratic -- and a predictable and safe ally. Vremya Novostey came closest to expressing skepticism about the electoral results, pointing out that 40 percent of the electorate cast their votes early and noting some exit poll results differed sharply from the official results. (Note: According to initial press reports, the well-respected Levada Center found Lukashenko was supported by 45 percent of Belarusians while opposition candidate Milinkevich enjoyed 25 percent of the vote. We were later told by the Levada Center that there had been methodological problems in the polling and the Center did not intend to release results. End Note.) Vremya Novostey also gave sympathetic coverage to the March 19 opposition protest in Minsk.

¶3. (C) Comment: We expect more pointed reactions from Russian officials and the press if ODHIR concludes that the Belarusian elections did not meet OSCE standards. The CIS observer mission has reportedly already endorsed the conduct of the election as "open and fair," which will be used by Russian officials to challenge any different conclusion by ODHIR.

¶4. (SBU) Begin informal translation of the MFA Press Release:

The Belarusian presidential election took place on March 19. Based on preliminary data from the Belarusian Central Election Commission, 90 percent of voters took part in the election. Approximately 80 percent voted for Lukashenko.

The election proceeded on an alternative basis. This allowed for the results of the vote to reflect the opinion of Belarus' citizens, and that is an indicator of the social will to move forward along a democratic path.

In Moscow our interest in the electoral campaign in Belarus

and in the situation around the country during the course of the election is understandable. After all, Belarus is not only our closest neighbor, but an ally of Russia and an economic partner that plays an important role in our trade relations with Europe.

The election was a testament to the high level of civil activity among the population, the interest of the Belarusian people in stability and the continuation of socially oriented policies. Belarusians clearly expressed their will, and it must be treated with respect.

There is a clear basis to consider that the election proceeded in accordance with generally recognized standards, and the legitimacy of its results are not to be doubted. This same conclusion, by the way, was drawn by a large group of observers from Russia and the CIS who took part in the monitoring mission.

The course of the electoral campaign and the election itself confirmed that the development of democratic institutions and the strengthening of the bases of civil society in Belarus, above all, depend on Belarus' internal processes, and also on the harmonious development of relations between Belarus and the external world.

End informal translation of MFA Press Release.

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